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Airman in California Is Charged in New Spy Case

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 28 — Law-enforcement officials said today that a 25-year-old airman had been charged with espionage after he attempted to provide the Soviet Union with classified information about the reconnaissance capabilities of the Air Force.

A Federal official said that the suspect, Airman 1st Class Bruce D. Ott of Beale Air Force Base in California, was arrested Wednesday after he contacted the Soviet consulate general in San Francisco and offered to provide Soviet agents with sensitive material involving national security.

The Air Force not disclose the arrest until this week, saying that it did not routinely announce arrests of its employees.

Spy Plane Is at Beale Base

The authorities declined to comment when asked if Airman Ott had attempted to pass information involving two highly secret spy planes, the U-2 and its successor, the SR-71, based at Beale, which is about 50 miles north of Sacramento.

The needle-nosed SR-71 is a high-altitude surveillance jet that flies on the

edge of space and can travel at speeds of nearly 2,000 miles per hour.

A Federal law-enforcement official said it appeared that the airman was arrested before any classified material had been passed to the Soviet Union.

The arrest was the most recent in an extraordinary series of espionage cases in the United States over the last year. Nearly a dozen current and former Government employees have been charged with espionage.

Airman Ott, an administrative clerk at the base, was taken into custody by the Air Force authorities after he attempted to meet with a Federal agent who was masquerading as a Soviet diplomat, according to a law-enforcement official who asked not to be named.

The arrest took place in Davis, Calif., not far from Sacramento, officials said. The Air Force said it decided to release information about the arrest when reporters inquired about rumors of an espionage case involving the service.

Charge Is Under Military Law

A spokesman for the air base, Capt. Joseph Saxon, said that Mr. Ott was formally charged under military law with attempting the unauthorized release of national security information.

He is being held at Beale and is awaiting a pretrial hearing in military court, the captain said.

Air Force officials said that Airman Ott would face an extended prison sentence if convicted, although they were unsure of the maximum penalty.

The Air Force would provide few details of what it said was a continuing investigation by the service's Office of Special Investigation and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

A Federal law-enforcement official said no other arrests were expected in the case.

Pressed for a description of the arrest, Sgt. Daryl E. Green, another base spokesman, read this statement: "The matter involving Airman Ott is the subject of an ongoing military judicial procedure. It would be premature and inappropriate to comment on details of the case at this time."

The SR-71, built by the Lockheed Corporation and nicknamed "the Blackbird," is an advanced long-range surveillance plane considered one of the fastest aircraft in the world. It is capable of surveying 60,000 square miles of territory an hour from an altitude of 80,000 feet.

Airman Ott, a native of Erie, Pa., lives in Yuba City, Calif., near Beale with his wife, Shellie. He previously served four years in the Army Reserve before joining the Air Force in December 1983. He had been stationed at Beale since April 1984.

The airman is being represented by an Air Force lawyer, Capt. Jordan Weitberg, who did not return a reporter's telephone calls.

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